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Media, Civil Society and Political Culture in West Africa

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Abstract

From the premise that a free and democratic society is impossible without free and responsible media and an active civil society and that freedom and democracy must evolve from within a particular society in order to mature into a way of life for the society and its media, the present study examines the symbiotic role of the media and civil society in West Africa's struggle for democratic governance. It addresses the question of the independence and accountability of West Africa's media vis-à-vis foreign donors, local business and political forces along with the effects on local audiences of giant Western/global media organizations competing in the region. The article concludes that West Africans must design their democratic model; that the West African media must be guided by normative ethics frameworks rooted in the values that inspire the region's democratic aspirations, and that global media ethics principals should essentially serve as supplemental guidelines to those frameworks.

Keywords

Accountability, Authoritarianism, Censorship, Civil society, Cold War, Democratic governance, Democratic transition, Freedom of expression, Freedom of information, Global media ethics, Human rights, Liberalization, Media freedom, Non-state media, Political culture, West Africa.

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Introduction and Overview

This article offers a discussion of the interdependence of mass media and civil society and their symbiotic role in the amelioration of political culture in West Africa. It also explores the challenges and opportunities that the quest for media global ethics represents for West Africa's media within the larger context of the relation between Africa's sociopolitical and cultural reality and the neoliberal model of democracy. The concept of amelioration of political culture is envisaged in this study as the historical transition from the acceptance of single-party civilian autocracies and military juntas to the progressive crystallization of values consistent with the ideal of political pluralism and social participation under the rule of law. Hence, the article addresses the trilogy media-state-society as well.

In this study I contend that any comprehensive discussion of the quest for media global ethics in Africa must take into account the ongoing democratization process and address the question whether Africa ought to adhere to the neoliberal view of democracy or re-appropriate democratic principles in light of her authentic values. There is no arguing that a free and democratic society is impossible without free and responsible media working with a civil society conscious of its rights and duties and actively engaged in the defense of such rights and the discharge of such duties. Nor is there doubt that sustainable media freedom is impossible without competent journalists imbued with the principles of truthfulness, independence, fairness and accountability. This universal view, however, should not eclipse the empirical fact that while the means for fostering a democratic society and free and responsible media may be borrowed from cultures with a tradition of such values, freedom and democracy as societal values must

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evolve from within a particular society in order to develop as a way of life for the society and its media institutions.

Some of the most far-reaching changes witnessed in West Africa since the late 1980s-early 1990s have taken place in the realm of liberalization of mass media toward community empowerment, citizen awareness and political participation. Among the leading catalysts of these changes are civil society organizations (CSOs), whose structural and operational autonomy from state apparatuses gives them the unique possibility to minimize the intrigues of state bureaucracies. Hence, it is fitting to examine the mutual advancement of West African civil society and independent media: To what extent the liberalization of mass media has contributed to the emergence of an active civil society through the flow of information and civic education? How has civil society, through its associational activity and civic organizations, been instrumental in furthering freedom of expression, free media and participation in the amelioration of political culture in the region?

These questions cannot be fully addressed unless one takes into account the fact that West African politics, media, and civil society have been profoundly marked by the region's diverse colonial heritages (French, British, and Portuguese) and by the effects of the Cold War during which most of the region was decolonized. If one accepts the notion that a state's policy of media-state-society relationship is a key indicator of its maturity in terms of social freedom and democratic governance, one must also bear in mind that West Africa's experience in this domain originated in the colonial era and that it was further complicated by the rise of postcolonial authoritarian states in the midst of the East-West and North-South Cold-War global divide. T. Lumumba-Kasongo (2002) puts this in the proper perspective when he writes:

> African states, including Ethiopia and Liberia, which were not formally colonized by European powers, are not the products of internal evolutionary and revolutionary processes and struggles. They are the products of colonial and neocolonial configurations of powers. As such, African states, as well as states elsewhere, are, in their behaviors and structure, essentially the

> reflections of the dynamics of world politics as defined by the European powers and political history. (p. 88)

To be sure, the colonial state was violent and exploitative; colonialism was holistic and its underlying purpose was to exploit indigenous manpower and extract resources for the advancement of the colonial powers' capitalist economies. The notion that colonialism was responsible for the introduction of democracy in Africa is, therefore, as inaccurate as the idea that present-day Africa is not ready for democracy. For one thing, colonial democracy was limited to European colonists and was only residually extended to Africans to the extent that such a move could preserve European interests. Also, as C. Lopes (1996) has argued, it is not inconceivable that "All countries, all societies and individuals are always ready for democracy," (p. 140) as long as democracy is not reduced to the neoliberal "universalisation of the democratic model." (p. 142) And while colonialism is to be credited for introducing modern media in Africa, a brief overview of the colonial history of the African media shows how distinctly differing patterns evolved in Francophone Africa, Anglophone Africa, and Lusophone Africa. (Perret, 2005) It helps, moreover, to understand the necessity for West Africa's societies and media to seek the underlying principles of their democratic agenda outside of these colonial patterns, for democratic governance had long strived in pre-colonial Africa and needs only to be properly restored to strive again.

The Media in West Africa, from Colonial Design to Liberalization

Historically, Anglophone Africa is credited for having pioneered a trend whereby the presence of English settlers in colonial southern and eastern Africa coupled with Britain's ensuing system of "indirect colonial rule" created the conditions for early and relatively widespread press activities. Although the British "did not encourage a critical local press with its own political agenda," (Kintz, 2007, parag. 3) this "privilege" was reserved to settler communities, they did tolerate the existence of a native cultural press,

thus contrasting the French "who tended to suppress development of an indigenous press … and emphasized assimilation of the native population to French culture." (parag. 3)

Thus, the first newspapers published on the African continent were all based in British Africa. Those included, in chronological order, *The Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser* (August 1800), *The Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser* (February 1801), *Royal Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer* (1822), the *Liberia Herald* (1826), *Iwe Irohin*, Nigeria's first newspaper published in 1859, and *East Africa and Uganda Mail* which appeared in Mombassa, Kenya, in 1899 (Ocitti, 1999, pp. 14-15). Conversely, the Africanization of the press in the eastern and southern regions of the continent was but a slow process marked by the presence of two parallel trends, as Ocitti (1999) points out.

Francophone Africa did not have a press prior to the Berlin Conference (1884-85) and the subsequent establishment of full fledged colonial rule. Even then, by colonial law, only Frenchmen were allowed to own the press in the colonies. This explains why between 1885 and 1933 all of the few newspapers published in French West Africa were based in Dakar. These included *Le Réveil du Sénégalais* (1885), *Le Petit Sénégalais* (1886) and *L'Union Africaine* (1896), and late comers such as *Paris-Dakar* which was created by media tycoon Charles de Breteuil who then proceeded to expand his empire eastward by launching *France-Africa* in Abidjan (1933), *Paris-Tana* in Yaoundé (1936), and *Paris-Congo* in Brazzaville (1938).

According to analysts, the total absence of a locally based press in Lusophone West Africa for most of the colonial era reflected a particularly harsh reality, namely "the absoluteness and autocratic nature of Portuguese rule in Africa [under which] newspapers were perceived as instruments that could awaken Africans to their rights," (Ocitti, 1999, p. 17) and eventually help mobilize them against colonial occupation.

It is against this background of institutionalized state control that the evolution of West Africa's mass media ought to be posited beginning with the period of the national liberation struggle (1940s and

50s), and leading to the decades of independence (1960s and 70s) during which most of the media were owned and operated by the states and, ultimately, to the current trend of liberalization. In this latter phase, however, attention must be paid to the Internet, which, by virtue of being one of the latest products of the current global revolution in mass communication, serves "as a platform for dialogue across borders and allow [s] for innovative approaches to the distribution and acquisition of knowledge," Schmidt (2007, p. 6) points out before noting that it "may also be undercut by attempts to regulate and censor both access and content."

Analyzing media liberalization in Africa, A. Fatoyinbo (2000) writes: "Mass media in Africa have undergone tremendous changes in the last decade. The monopoly by government has been broken. Radio and television are improving and are gradually becoming powerful instruments for public information and education." (p. 1) The author goes on to say: "In virtually every African country, private newspapers are flourishing. Ten years ago, in most French-speaking countries in West Africa, there was usually just one national daily newspaper; invariably it was government-owned, with a few privately-sponsored newspapers struggling to survive as weeklies, biweeklies and monthlies." (p. 1)

The print media, it must be said, were the first to experience the birth of independent outlets in West Africa in the mid-1980s with the creation of the *Guardian* in Nigeria, *Wal Fadjiri* in Senegal, *L'Observateur* in Burkina Faso, and *La Gazette du Golfe* in Benin. As political change spread across the region, the print media diversified further so that by February 2004 PANOS Institute West Africa (PIWA) was able to record the existence of 513 publications in the region. (PIWA, 2004, p. 9)

PIWA experts are quick to point out, though, that this number can be misleading unless the following observations are taken into consideration. First, only a small minority of these publications appeared regularly. Second, some of them seemed to have been created around particular events such election cycles and, therefore, appeared only on such occasions. Third, most publications were marred by amateurism. Fourth, in the absence of regional calibration of the mass media all existing publications were

(and still are) confined to local readerships. Finally, the number of existing publications by country reflected neither the country's degree of political liberalization (Guinea had more publications than Senegal, even though the latter enjoys greater political freedom) nor its economic strength (Niger's press by far outnumbered that of Côte d'Ivoire, even though the latter is economically stronger). (PIWA, 2004, p. 9)

With its adaptability to the orality-based communication cultures of Africa and its affordability, radio has long been the most far-reaching modern mass medium on the continent. This is perhaps why the liberalization of radio broadcasting seems more expressive of an African political regime's degree of openness to freedom of expression. In West Africa, the so-called "radio explosion" began in the 1990s with the birth of private stations of different formats: music, sports, health, religion, youth agendas and women's issues.

Television has, somewhat moderately, followed course even though, as Fatoyinbo (2000) argues "many of the new private stations face major problems. Most of them are underfunded, overly commercialized, and have become re-transmitters of programs by powerful, Western TV stations." (p. 3) The author further denounces this "invasion of African TV by external programs" which, in his opinion, "is mainly due to the weak financial base of the stations and the lack of local production capacities." (p. 3)

Owing to its very nature, the Internet has proven harder to maintain under state control, even though state agencies do attempt to use infrastructural monopoly and/or other means in an attempt to impose the kind of censorship of access against which Schmidt (2007) has warned. With its multimedia capabilities, combining words, sound, pictures, and moving images in one comprehensive package, coupled with its instantaneousness, the Internet democratizes information and communication in a way that no other mass medium has done in history. One major way in which this NICT has broken state monopoly over information is its effective challenge to news agencies which, in the words of Fatoyinbo (2000), had long enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the collection and distribution of national and international news, thus

working as one of the most influential state-run information power houses in West Africa. In addition, by compressing communicational space and time the Internet helps "to strengthen the institutions of representative government and civil society, to enable citizens to gather information and mobilize coalitions around policy issues, and to improve government efficiency and transparency through better communication with citizens." (Schmidt, 2007, p. 7)

In transition societies such as West Africa's, a sustainable growth of free mass media capable of influencing meaningfully the transition to democracy must start with the creation of a legal and political environment favorable to freedom of expression. As a principle, this universal programmatic approach to media reform is both desirable in, and applicable to the current West African context, but its concrete implementation must be fundamentally based upon an African normative ethical framework. Institutionally speaking, West African states have endeavored to apply the principle in different ways. In Guinea, Mali, Benin, Niger and Togo, the creation of the legal enabling environment is consecrated in the constitution while in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso it was the subject of separate legislations. From there the process evolved with the creation of regulatory and self-regulatory institutions.

The mission of the regulatory institutions, as summarized in a PIWA study, is essentially "to guarantee all political groups and schools of thought equal access to the media, to protect pluralism, fairness and balance of information, including but not limited to periods of elections, and to insure deontological integrity in the media." (PIWA, 2004, p. 23) In some cases regulatory institutions are charged with allocating frequencies for private radio and television, writing the rules governing the audiovisual landscape along with the ethical codes, and overseeing the enforcement of such rules and codes. In other cases they are also tasked to regulate advertisement, to manage state financial allocations to the private media, and to appoint public media administrators. In Senegal, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, the accreditation of journalists and other media agents (in both public and private media) is also administered by a state regulatory agency known as the *Commission Nationale de la Carte de Presse*.

Oversight or self-regulatory institutions were created, in general, by coalitions of media professionals with the technical assistance and/or support of members of the judicial sector and other civil society organizations. Working conjointly with corresponding human rights organizations, these institutions endeavor to promote professionalism and ethical integrity among media agents whose professional rights and liberties they are mandated to defend against both state abuses and non-state infringements.

These institutions constitute, at the national level, the normative ethics structures under which West Africa's liberalized mass media have been functioning in the post-1990s. At the regional level, principally in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), media agents have also mobilized into a large array of associational organizations through which they interact with the broader system of civil society organizations present in the respective countries. Most of these associational organizations are also affiliated with regional, continental and international media organizations involved in the defense of press freedom and in the pursuit of an ethical standard compatible with pertinent global norms. Such organizations include: Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), West Africa Journalist Association (WAJA), Africa Free Media Foundation (AFMF), Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa, the African Women's Media Center (AWMC), the African Media Development Initiative (AMDI), the Pan-African Press Association (PPA), the Inter-Africa Network for Women, Media, Gender Equity and Development (FAMEDEV), and the Network of African Freedom of Expression Organizations (NAFEO). They also include PANOS Institute West Africa (PIWA), International Press Institute (IPI), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Media & Democracy Group (M&D Group), and so forth.

The question here concerns the influence of the global media market, the interaction between international NGOs, local NGOs, states, and national media, and how all of this can influence the role of the media in the democratization process in West Africa. This question can be addressed by pointing out

that this multilayered framework has noticeably impacted the media in West African nations and enhanced their role in the democratization process by focusing on key areas such as media rights advocacy, education and capacity building.

In the area of education and capacity building, national and international NGOs began by assessing the state of the African media in the ECOWAS zone where media organizations quickly recognized the urgent need for new and more dynamic training initiatives if the region's media are to measure up to the challenges of their mission. Be it in Ghana, Senegal, Sierra Leone or Nigeria, the findings of AMDI researchers such as S. Kafewo (Kafewo, 2006) I. Seck (Seck, 2006) D. Tam-Baryoh (Tam-Baryoh, 2006) J. Z. Okwori and A. M. Adeyanju (Okwori and Adeyanju, 2006) have consistently stressed training as being one of the items to be included in the strategic priorities of governments, civil society, international partners and leaders of the media sector if professionalism is to be strengthened.

Also, having lauded the creation of a sizeable number of radio and television outlets as well as newspapers in West Africa since the Windhoek Conference of 1990 on media liberalization, the African Federation of Press Houses and Centers (FAMCP) goes on to say:

> Yet, among the operators of these new media, one encounters a large number of young colleagues with no professional credentials. The same is true in the public media many of which thenceforth function as autonomous structures. Hence, professional media organizations (unions, associations and so on) are increasingly aware of the necessity to include in their strategic planning the implementation of quality education and training for these young aspiring journalists. (FAMCP, 2007, p. 1)

PIWA corroborates this observation by pointing out that while the relatively low level of professional competency represents a serious weakness for West Africa's media in general, "[the region's] professional organizations show a strong will to improve the competence of their human resources which, along with the enhancement of existing institutions of education and training in the sciences and

techniques of information and communication, constitutes a priority on their strategic planning agenda ” (PIWA, 2004, p. 16)

This is to say that the current outcry for education and training by no means implies that there has not been a recognizable pursuit of education and training of media practitioners in the past. Rather it means that, in view of the new imperatives brought about by the global information and communication revolution on the one hand, and the ever increasing demands for freedom of expression and democratic governance in Africa on the other, there is a heightened awareness of the limitations of past approaches to media education and training.

In fact, as of 2004, West Africa possessed a sizeable network of national and regional, public and private, information and communication-centered vocational schools and university departments even though up until the 1990s private journalism schools were still scarce. Thus, according PIWA, by 2004 every West African nation, except Gambia and Cape Verde, had at least one fully functional media-related public or private school, ranging from regional institutes (such as the CESTI, INADES and URTNA), national university departments, technical schools run by the ministries of information and communication, and continuing education centers. The curricula in these schools are basically centered “upon the learning of fundamental and advanced techniques of print and electronic media; the broadening of general education; the mastery of a second language (English) and that of legal notions (media law and ethics). Also affixed to this core are courses in international relations, political science, economics, and information sociology.” (PIWA, 2004, p. 27)

Media-Civil Society Symbiosis and the Amelioration of Political Culture

The amelioration of political culture can be best posited with a clear understanding of the multidimensional nature of political culture both as a theoretical paradigm and a sociopolitical reality, the

latter comprising endogenous as well as exogenous components, particularly in post-colonial West Africa. Understood as a concept that "summarizes a complex and varied portion of social reality," as R. Dawson and K. Prewitt (Dawson and Prewitt, 1969:26) suggest, political culture is a holistic notion. As such, it refers to "political traditions and folk heroes, the spirit of public institutions, political passions of the citizenry, goals articulated by the political ideology, and both formal and informal rules of the political game." (p. 26) The concept "also includes other real, but elusive, factors, such as political stereotypes, political style, political moods, the tone of political exchanges, and finally, some sense of what is appropriately political and what is not." (p. 26)

Thus envisioned, political culture in contemporary West Africa is a compound of pre-colonial values inherited from a large array of ethno-cultural, political, and religious entities. The compound also includes the imbrications of these indigenous African values and imported Islamic and Christian ones upon which post-colonial experiences are being erected. Therefore, at the core of West African political culture (s), resides the meeting point of elite-based political practices, as inherited from the colonial era, and mass movements for grassroots sociopolitical and economic empowerment, as revitalized from traditional societal structures. The confluence of these spheres marked the birth of a new brand of civil society in each country and, to a certain degree, the spread of it across national boundaries thanks, to a great extent, to the media.

It must be noted, though, that it would be historically erroneous to treat the so-called associative revolution of the past decade as a novelty in West African history. Long before the birth of the postcolonial nation-states grassroots associations had made their marks in the region's social-cultural dynamics. S. Hodgkin (Hodgkin, 1956, p. 9) seems to concur when he argues that African nationalism truly fermented in social and cultural settings before it could penetrate the political realm due chiefly to the fact that for a long time Africans were not given the opportunity to organize politically. And G. Hyden and C. Okigbo (Hyden and Okigbo, 2002) add: "Because Africans felt no ownership of the [colonial] state

and generally perceived it more as a burden than an asset, they were particularly anxious to organized themselves outside the state realm" (pp.32-33).

This is to say that the proliferation of community-based nongovernmental organizations reflects a deep-rooted African tradition of communal self-help and mutual support henceforth revitalized through new instruments of mobilization, sensitization, and participation such as the modern mass media. A key dimension of this symbiosis of independent media and civil society is that while West African non-state media undoubtedly contribute to the maturing of national and regional civil society organizations, they also depend on a dubious combination of state allocations, non-profit support, and commercial input.

Because of their precarious financial situation some local media-centered NGOs end up developing a relation of dependency with wealthy donors (local and foreign alike) whose interests they thenceforth take to heart. This quid pro quo has the unintended consequence of undermining the very nature of local NGOs and compromising their ability to foster community empowerment among their constituencies. It also tends to jeopardize the ethical standing of non-state media whose dependence on foreign donors forces upon them an unwritten rule of self-censorship. In other words and with regards to the quest for global media ethics, this raises the crucial question of the true independence of NGO-sponsored "independent/non-state media": With their heavy reliance on NGOs for sustained funding, professional training, technical equipment, ready-made audiovisual programs, access to satellite networks and so on, can these media achieve a respectable degree of freedom, independence, objectivity and accountability?

In the face of this ethical dilemma regional civil society networks are being concertedly put in place in an effort to curb dependency on foreign interest and support the furtherance of freedom and accountability in West Africa's media. Among the many actions that most eloquently exemplify this trend is the launching in Lagos, in September 2006, of the Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC), whose objective is to "provide technical assistance to civil society organizations in the region involved in various stages of Freedom of Information work, including the drafting of access to information bills,

advocacy for their passage into Law, implementation, litigation and monitoring activities." ("Africa freedom," 2007, p. 1)

The Centre was established for the purpose of discussing "ways to promote the right of access to information held by public authorities and, in particular, to share experiences regarding strategies for advancing the adoption of laws that fully protect this right." The forum, better known as Regional Workshop on Freedom of Information in Africa, was organized by Media Rights Agenda (MRA) in collaboration with the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI). ("The Lagos declaration," 2006, p. 1)

The participants, who represented 30 civil society organisations from 16 African countries, adopted an important document thenceforth known as the Lagos Declaration on the Right of Access to Information. In the course of the discussion of the Declaration Edetaen Ojo, who had been designated Director of the Centre, indicated: "It is unacceptable that out of about 75 countries around the world that currently have Freedom of Information laws, Africa accounts for only four of that number. We expect the Centre to tip the scales in our favor by energizing ongoing campaigns in a number of countries for the adoption of such laws and launching fresh initiatives in other countries." ("Africa freedom," 2007, p. 2) After reiterating the concern over the fact that "Africa is lagging behind in the global movement towards the adoption of Freedom of Information Laws," (p. 2) the participants called on African governments to work with civil society organisations to draft bills and adopt laws that respect, at a minimum, the following 10 principles:

1. **Access to information is a right of everyone.** Anyone may request information. There should be no citizenship requirements and no need to justify why the information is being sought.

2. **Access is the rule – secrecy is the exception.** Information held by government bodies is public in principle. Information can be withheld only for a narrow set of legitimate reasons set forth in international law and also codified in national law.

3. **The right applies to all public bodies and private bodies performing public functions.** The public has a right to receive information in the possession of any institution funded by the public and private bodies performing public functions, such as water and electricity providers.

4. **Making requests should be simple, speedy, and free.** Making a request should be simple. The only requirements should be to supply a name, address and description of the information sought. Requestors should be able to file requests in writing or orally. Information should be provided immediately or within a short timeframe. The cost should not be greater than the reproduction of documents and mailing, where applicable.

5. **Officials have a duty to assist requestors.** Public officials should assist requestors in making their requests. If a request is submitted to the wrong public body, officials should transfer the request to the appropriate body.

6. **Refusals must be justified.** Governments may only withhold information from public access if disclosure would cause demonstrable harm to legitimate interests, such as national security or privacy. These exceptions must be clearly and specifically defined by law. Any refusal must clearly state the reasons for withholding the information.

7. **The public interest takes precedence over secrecy.** Information must be released when the public interest outweighs any harm in releasing it. There is a strong presumption that information about threats to the environment, health, or human rights, and information

revealing corruption, should be released, given the high public interest in such information.

8. **Everyone has the right to apply for a review of an adverse decision.** All requestors have the right to a prompt and effective judicial review of a public body's refusal or failure to disclose information.

9. **Public bodies must maintain and manage records, and should proactively publish core information.** Every public body should make readily available information about its functions and responsibilities, including a list of the types of documents and information that it holds, without need for a request. This information should be current, clear, and in plain language.

10. **The right should be guaranteed by an independent body.** An independent agency, such as an ombudsperson or commissioner, should be established to review refusals, promote awareness, and advance the right to access information. ("The Lagos declaration," 2006, p. 5)

The participants concluded the Declaration by agreeing to establish a pan-African Freedom of Information Centre which will serve as a platform for cooperation and collaborative activities among civil society organizations and where "experiences garnered in the different countries can be pooled and shared among civil society activists and which will provide technical assistance to organizations involved in any stage of Freedom of Information advocacy or implementation." ("The Lagos declaration," 2006, p. 2)

Among the other civil society organizations promoting freedom and efficiency in the media one can cite African Women's Media Center (AWMC), a Dakar-based project of the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), which, in the words of Africa IWMF Project Manager G. Nadi, ("From Gifti Nadi," 2000, p. 1) "provides women journalists the training, resources and tools they need to compete

equally with their male colleagues." Another organization that epitomizes this civil society-media solidarity for freedom and democratic governance is the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) which, in 2005, co-sponsored a pan-African forum known as the Accra Conference of African Freedom of Expression Organizations.

Also, in an effort to take full advantage of the Internet in their struggle for global media freedom, the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), two of the world's major media advocacy organizations, launched, in November 1997, a new pan-African e-mail exchange network aimed at helping to support press freedom and build stronger independent media in Africa. The new network, known as RAP 21 (French acronym for *Réseau Africain de Press pour le 21ème Siècle* or African Press Network for the 21st Century), "will include journalists and media executives working for the independent media and will provide the first ever 'live' link to the outside world for hundreds of professionals who currently work in complete isolation from their peers and colleagues elsewhere on the continent." (Arenstein, 2000, p. 1) In addition, as J. Arenstein further explains, RAP 21 will act as an alert system for press freedom attacks on the continent and will provide information about management and training opportunities. Such an initiative represents a powerful global civil society support for sustainable media freedom in Africa as a whole, in the sense that the increased availability of Internet communication resources has proven highly effective in enabling African journalists to circumvent government censorship. (Lupa-Lasaga, 1997)

With the current political transition being central to the overall program of amelioration of political culture in West Africa, it is worth noting that the transition has been the subject of highly mixed assessments ranging from cautious optimisms to cautious pessimisms and to outright declarations of failure. These mixed assessments reflect the wide variety of situational manifestations of the transition from state to state. One is, nonetheless, inclined to argue that the analysis can be better articulated when the process is envisioned more in terms of historical qualitative transformation of a deep-rooted political

culture and less in terms of sequential unfolding of foreign-induced electoral cycles. In other words, in order to adequately capture the multidimensional essence of the transition analysts must examine the process in ways that transcend the narrow parameters set by the typically quantitative approach that observers have too often utilized by stressing the number of electoral cycles, of competing parties and candidates, and statistical outcomes of such cycles in this and that country. Avoiding this simplistic approach has the methodological advantage of enabling the researcher to grasp the process from a bottom-up and inside-out perspective, namely the crystallization of the African peoples' conscious aspiration to, and plight for the institution of a system of governance evolving around their authentic values.

There is no denying that African politics and economics have been substantially influenced, for better or for worse, by a number of foreign pressure mechanisms toward liberalization since the late 1970s-early 1980s. These pressure mechanisms include, but are not limited to:

- the propagation of the neoliberal agenda also known as the 'Washington Consensus';
- the imposition of the Bretton Woods Institutions' Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs);
- the recalibration of world priorities following the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc and the ensuing marginalization of Africa by the new global political economy;
- the blunt ultimatums of Western powers ordering African leaders to adopt multipartyism or else (such as the one that French President François Mitterrand uttered at the French-African Summit of La Baule in 1990)[3].

It would be historically misleading, though, to present these pressures as the primary causes of the struggle for good governance in Africa. (Le Vine, 2004, p. 247) The aspirations of the African populations to a system of governance which they understand and accept as being most suited to their needs (short

[3] According to V. T. Le Vine (2004, p.247), "At the June 19-21, 1990, Franco-African summit in La Baule, France, Mitterrand made the threat explicit, bluntly telling the African leaders that French aid would be reserved for countries moving toward democracy: French aid-giving 'would be increasingly lukewarm with regard to regimes which comport themselves in an authoritarian manner' and 'enthusiastic with regard to those who courageously take that step' toward democratization."

term), wants (medium term), and ideals (long term) are longstanding values. These values were the driving force behind the movements that challenged even the most entrenched civilian autocracies of founding fathers of the 1950s and 60s, and military committees of "national redemption," "national liberation," "national reunification" and so forth of the 1970s.

In the midst of the Cold War cooptation of African autocracies by both the West and the East for self-serving strategic reasons, "strong states" were challenged by forces advocating political pluralism and transparency, human rights, and due process of law. Among these "strong states" were ideological regimes as diverse as those of Sékou Touré in Guinea, Houphouët-Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire, and Leopold Senghor in Senegal. Interestingly enough, for a variety of reasons, even those regimes that were consistently vilified in the West for their "dictatorial nature," like Sékou Touré's, survived the storm and rivaled, in longevity, those pampered by the same West like Houphouët-Boigny's which was by no means less dictatorial.

Contrary to the widespread argument predicating the advancement of democratic reforms in West Africa on the forcefulness of foreign-induced awakening, the democratic transition is the manifestation of a longstanding aspiration of the African people. This aspiration had not manifested itself in post-colonial Africa with the magnitude it has acquired lately because it had been repressed by authoritarian regimes emboldened by economic, political, and military support from foreign powers eager to secure Cold War strategic alliances on the continent.

It is therefore fair to say that what changed fundamentally following the end of the Cold War was the attitude of the West, i.e. the winner of the Cold War, which no longer needed Africa's Cold War strategic alliance, until the events of September 11, 2001, that is. The attitude of the erstwhile Eastern Bloc has changed as well, mainly because its disaggregating components have been chiefly inward bound in efforts to reconstruct themselves and find a fitting place in Western capitalism. As for the internal dynamics of the struggle for democratic governance in Africa, it is safe to suggest that it never died off and that it was

intermittently hampered only to regain momentum when the objective and subjective conditions so permitted.

With cultural authenticity and African agency being strongly held by pan-Africanists to be the centrifugal force of the advancement of any African society, the notion of a successful transplantation of Western liberal democracy seems unrealistic and wasteful. To be sure, E. M. Edi's (Edi, 2007, p. 88) "African-centered theory of democracy" or "neo-traditional modernized approach" paradigm deserves attentive consideration on the part of scholars, political leaders, media practitioners, civil society leaders, and foreign pro-democracy activists operating in Africa.

In other words, the universalist approach to democratization ought to be seriously rethought in a way that makes the nurturing of a realistic democratic political culture among the multiple layers of African societies the end, and the practice of free and fair elections one of the means to that end, and not the other way around. In the process, government accountability to the governed (as opposed to opportunistic accountability to foreign donors and lenders) must be cultivated, along with freedom of expression and freedom of associative organization, which were among the values that enabled pre-colonial African societies to govern themselves as nations and to coexist with differing political cultures.

Media, Political Transition and the Question of Global Ethics

It is from the above standpoint that the role of the media in the amelioration of the political culture in the age of the democratic transition ought to be envisioned, beginning with what Hyden and Okigbo (2002) term the creation of a discursive realm, namely the structural space that media outlets provide for the various players to fuel the debate from which emanates a more mature political culture.

Accordingly, it should be noted that the lifting of state monopoly over the media represents in itself a considerable political gain in that it is the outcome of a major struggle in the course of which journalists,

political activists and human rights advocates alike lost their freedom, if not their lives, in the hands of government forces. The mobilization of pro-democracy forces which swept West Africa and brought to an end entrenched single-party autocracies and military juntas in the last decade of the twentieth century, was the concerted action of multiple segments of the citizenry: students and educators, trade unions, political parties, youth and women's organizations, religious organizations, media professionals, and so on.

Such was the case in Benin with the first successful *Conférence Nationale* (1989), in Mali with the overthrow of General Moussa Traoré (1991), in Guinea with the relatively successful introduction of multiparty politics (1991), in Nigeria with the transition from successive military dictatorships to a democratically elected head of state (1999), and in Senegal with the ending of the decades-long rule of the Socialist Party and the election of Abdoulaye Wade (2000). Such also has been the case in Liberia and Sierra Leone where recovering national media and an emergent civil society have been in the forefront of the reconstruction effort following years of civil war.

A. Olukotun (2000) puts the media-state-civil society relationship in Nigeria's 1998-99 political transition in a comprehensive historical perspective by pointing out: "Given that the transition itself eventually came about after several failed attempts, and as a result of pressures by the international community acting in tandem with a resurgent civil society, there was understandable care to present an acceptable face and come up with a passable outcome. Thus, the government put no overt pressure on the media prior to, during and after the various elections." (p. 32) The author is also keen to underline the fact that although General Abdusalami Abubakar, in power at the time of the transition, did not enforce them, "all the anti-media decrees promulgated by Generals Babangida and Abacha were on the statue books … [and] hovered like a sword of Damocles over journalists and other civil society groups throughout the transition." (p. 35) The decrees in question include: "Offensive Publications (Proscription) Decree No. 35 of 1993; State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree No. 2 of 1984 … The Treason and Other Offences

(Special Military Tribunal) Decree No. 1 of 1996; as well as The Constitution (Suspension and Modification) Decree No. 107 of 1993." (p. 35)

On the other hand, Olukotun (2000) acknowledges that while the plural nature and anti-dictatorial resilience of Nigeria's media made it difficult for any non-state to control them in the end they "obeyed an economic logic by on average giving more prominence and attention to the People's Democratic Party (PDP), than the other two parties." (p. 32) Olukotun suggests that this ethical laxity was partly the consequence of the harsh economic conditions that the media endured in the years between 1994 and 1999, including the imposition of 5 percent Value Added Tax on newspapers which forced newspapers to increase their cover price.

In Senegal, Saidou Dia (2002, p. 23) credits mostly independent radio stations and the mobile telephone for the successful "political alternation" of 2000. According to Dia, the use of mobile phones allowed reporters to move freely from polling center to polling center, to monitor and report the process live to their respective national and local radio stations. This "new way of doing radio" was exemplified "by the major role [the NITCs] played in monitoring the regularity and transparency of the electoral process and in awakening a 'new citizen awareness', which they were instrumental in promoting among the Senegalese electorate." (p. 23) Dia expands this assessment to what he calls "the exemplary interaction and complementarity between radio and the written press in the voting process, through the strategic importance of the mobile telephone." (p. 23) He, furthermore, credits the successful contribution of radio broadcasting to the "simultaneous use of French and national languages, particularly *Wolof* [which] enhanced the impact of these broadcasts on the public." (p. 23)

Souhel Hajjar, (personal communication December 2006) the Director of Radio Nostalgie-Guinée, concurs when he indicates that during election cycles radio and the print media complement each other and provide a much needed diversification of news, analyses, and opinions the like of which neither could effectively provide separately. He further credits local NGOs as the main agents for the liberalization of

radio in Guinea, the last West African country to do so. With General Conté's regime taking advantage of nearly every mass protest to further muffle the independent press and radio stations, the Internet has increasingly gained public recognition among urban Guineans. This was most noticeable during the national strike of 2007 at the peak of which the ministry of Information violently shut down independent radio stations, local and international alike. During most of the month-long general strike (January 10-February 9) news and analyses of the event filtered mainly through websites such as Guineenews.com, Guinea24.com, Aminata.com, all of which are maintained abroad by Guineans of the Diaspora and financed by Guinean and international civil society organizations.

Addressing the influence of radio on West Africa's changing political environment, Edi (2007) indicates that one of the many reasons that explain why radio broadcasting took the lead in the so-called media revolution of the 1990s is the fact that the liberalization of the airwaves also benefited foreign radio broadcast services such as RFI, the BBC, Africa No. 1, and the VOA. The author notes that these services became so important in providing fresh information, the audience tended to be oblivious of their partial and sometimes biased treatment of information because of which they caused social tensions within populations and between populations and governments. (p. 70) Edi then concludes with these words: "The coverage of political and social issues by the foreign media services was scanty, limited, partial, and essentially geared towards crises." (p. 70)

One may or may not share Edi's analysis of these powerful Western/global media's coverage of West Africa and his assessment of the psychological effect the coverage has upon the local audience. Likewise, one may or may not agree with MFWA (2005) on a possible correlation between press freedom, economics, and the deontological integrity of West African journalists. What remains, nonetheless, is that the issue of global versus local media ethics in the region's present sociopolitical context must be tackled with a keen sense of measure and discernment.

H. Wasserman (2006) offers an insightful approach to the issue which he introduces by asking the question: "Can media ethics travel?" The author tackles the question by evoking concrete cases such as the common practice of kickbacks in Cameroon that some view as a coping mechanism for economic survival rather than a willful breach of ethics; the Mugabe government's severe clamping down on the private media, and President Thabo Mbeki's view that post-apartheid South Africa's journalists should be "guide dogs" rather than "attack dogs." (parag. 1) He then proceeds to posit the issue in terms of what one can term the dilemma of globalization, localization, and "glocalization" of media ethics in Africa with "glocalization" aiming "to capture something of the push-and-pull of globalization, where the flux of global culture is met with a local resistance and counter-flow." (parag. 5) Arguing that the result of this phenomenon "is often a hybrid between the global and the local," Wasserman notes: "Seen this way, the global and the local are not opposites, but mutually constructive, interconnected forces," (parag. 5) and concludes that media ethical frameworks can travel "but they do not return from the journey unchanged." (parag. 13)

It is not an exaggeration to say that the kickbacks or "rewards" recorded in Cameroon are common occurrences in many parts of Africa and that President Mbeki's philosophy is shared by a number of African leaders, some of whom also espouse Mugabe's attitude toward independent media whenever the latter's independence challenges their lack of accountability. One only needs to follow the press alerts of MFWA, Reporters Without Borders and other media advocacy NGOs to realize the magnitude of the ethical problems with which both the state and the media are burdened and which only an Africa-centered media ethics framework can efficaciously address.

This is why one is inclined to concur with Wasserman by suggesting that because Africa is an integral part of the highly diverse global world, the African media cannot escape the integrative powers of globalization, especially since globalization is, in many regards, driven by mass media. On the other hand, however, the African media cannot afford to have their identity, also a central aspect of the African

identity, diluted in a Western-centered set of normative media ethics frameworks. In the final analysis, the normative framework for West Africa's new media ethics must be rooted in the African values that have been driving the struggle from democratic governance, and that global ethical norms should be adopted insofar as they do not lead to the acculturation of the region's media and society.

This, in turn, raises the question of capitalization and economic sustainability of the private media in a region with a market thus far too feeble to support the kind of competitive supply-and-demand mechanism necessary for the sustainable development of a healthy independent media environment. In order to meet the challenge, West Africa's media market must necessarily grow within an integrated pan-African information and communication market equipped to thrive in the global arena. Unless this growth is pursued in earnest, it is conceivable that the trend of political cooptation by political parties and/or states, and that of financial monopolization by media tycoons with which some outlets feel compelled to contend will continue to plague the region's information and communication environment and lend it to all sorts of globalist assaults.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore the democratic transition in West Africa by focusing on the dialectical interdependence that has been developing inside the trilogies of media-civil society-political culture and media-state-society relative to the debate on the relation between the African context and the quest for media global ethics. The article has analyzed the evolution of the West African media from colonial design to the post-colonial state control and to the current phase of liberalization in an effort to elucidate the hybrid nature of the region's political and media heritage and underline the complexity of the ongoing amelioration of its political culture.

While giving due credit to foreign NGOs for their support for West African media, and to Western/global media organizations for contributing to the globalization of information in this part of the

world, the study raises serious issues relative to the true independence of local media organizations vis-à-vis foreign donors, Western media giants, and local business and political forces. The study further contends that given their historical experience and their present realities, West African societies ought to assertively design their models of democratic governance without hindering the advancement of human rights, political pluralism and freedom of expression, rather than cater blindly to the neoliberal democratic model.

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